



## CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: July 24, 2006

To: Members of the Historical Commission

From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner  
Paul Trudeau, Preservation Administrator

Re: D-1070: 16 Churchill Avenue

An application to demolish the house at 16 Churchill Avenue was received on July 12. The applicant was notified of an initial determination of significance, and a public hearing was scheduled for August 3rd.

### Site

This single-family house is located on the east side of Churchill Street, located off Massachusetts Avenue in Northwest Cambridge (see attached Sanborn map). The structure is a 1½ -story, frame dwelling on a cedar post and brick foundation. A curb cut and driveway are located on the south side of the house.

The structure is sited on a 4,781 square-foot lot (Map 184/Parcel 11) in a Residence B zone. The residential zone allows one and two-family construction. The zone permits an FAR of .50 and has a height limit of 35 feet. The house has ample setbacks, with its rear lot line extending back to Clarendon Park. Neighboring properties include 20-22 Churchill (found to be a preferably preserved significant building on 2 April 1998, case D-712), the Just-A-Start affordable housing complex at 2525 Massachusetts Avenue, and the large Clarendon Apartments complex at 35-55 Clarendon Avenue (see photos).

### Architectural Description

The house at 16 Churchill Avenue is a 1½-story structure that was moved to its current site in 1864. The house has a shallow-pitched side gable roof, asphalt shingle siding, and primarily one-over-one vinyl replacement windows. The front façade reveals a narrow entrance door at the left corner, capped with a simple, bracketed pent roof, and flanked by two small windows. The right (south) facade reveals off-centered windows on the first and second floors, while the left (north) façade has symmetrical window placement. The ell, added after the house was moved in 1864, has similar detailing as the main body of the house with its side gable roof, narrow eaves, and simple window moldings. A later addition with a side entrance comes off the ell, having a shed roof, block foundation, a single eight-over-

eight double-hung sash wood window, and one-over-one vinyl replacement windows.



Streetscape of Churchill Avenue looking north, with 16 Churchill in foreground

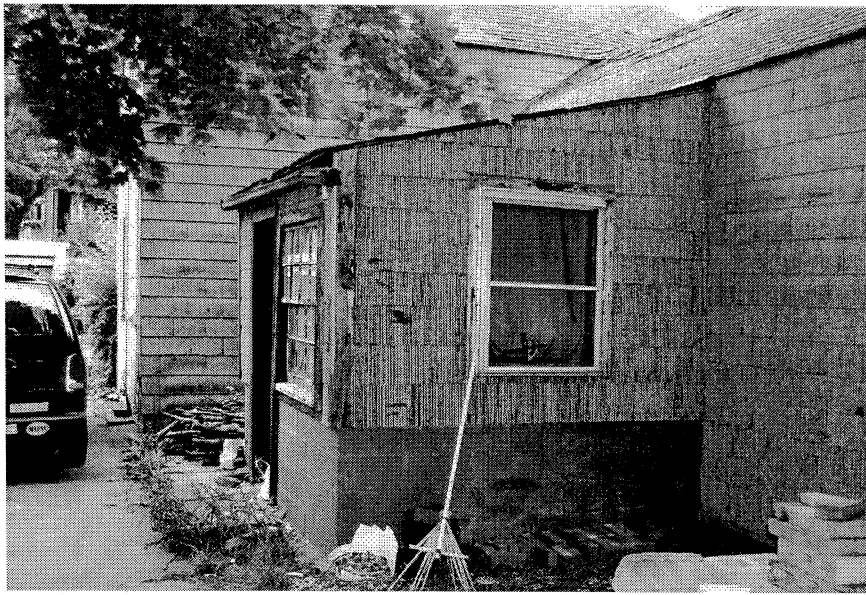


16 Churchill Avenue looking south, 2525 Mass Ave. in background

### Current Conditions

The current condition of the house appears poor, and there are signs of considerable neglect. The asphalt siding has moderate bulging in several areas, indicating mismanagement of water diversion. Exterior window casings and moldings are in fair condition, but several have lost their paint and have weathered significantly, or have been replaced with untreated wood. Overgrown vegetation at

the foundation suggests a build-up and retention of moisture below the house, although the structural integrity of the front portion of the building appears stable. The rear ell and shed roof addition show significant deterioration in the roof shingles, window casings, and eaves, mostly due to lack and/or failure of gutters and downspouts, and an abundance of overgrown vegetation (see photos). Both chimneys have considerable mortar failure and have bowed slightly.



Rear ell and later shed roof addition (photos submitted with application)

### History

A road to the fish weirs at Alewife Brook was laid out in the mid-seventeenth century, a route that eventually became Churchill Avenue and Matignon Avenue. John Dickson built a house and barn in the seventeenth century near the present day intersection of Churchill Avenue and Matignon Avenue. Churchill Avenue was formerly called Tannery Street, after the tanneries that German immigrants established in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century along Tannery Brook, a tributary of Alewife

Brook. Philip Hoffman started a tannery in 1845 at the present intersection of Churchill Avenue and Muller Avenue. The city purchased the remainder of the Dickson property in 1849, and built the almshouse and city farm there in 1851.

William Muller bought Hoffman's business and expanded it in 1864. Because of increased demand for leather goods during the Civil War, Ferdinand Fischer and Michael Kubler were able to open two other tanneries in the mid 1860s. The tanneries produced foul odors and were highly unsanitary, and most nearby residents were too poor to relocate from the area then known as "Poverty Plain." As streetcar service extended to the area in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became a more attractive location for suburban development. Consequently, neighborhood complaints and visits from the Board of Health led to the gradual demise of the tannery complex. Muller's Tannery, which employed about 60 people in 1875, stayed in business until related pressures closed the business down in 1927 and the tannery buildings were soon demolished. Several new streets were formed when Tannery Brook was diverted into a culvert. These streets were Murray Hill Road, Muller Avenue, and Richard Avenue. The neighborhood was soon developed with predominantly two-family houses.

The exact age and origin of the house at 16 Churchill Avenue remains a mystery. There are indications that the central portion of the house facing Churchill Avenue dates to the late-18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These features include the close-cropped eaves, the size and placement of windows, and a higher rear wall and roofline, suggesting a former lean-to at the rear of the house. Moreover, the hand-sawn joists in the exposed cellar framing signify early 19<sup>th</sup> century construction. However, a different framing system exists in the ell, which suggests that it was added to the main body after the structure was moved to its current site in 1864.

Research on the property suggests that the building might be an ell from the house originally located at 2519 Massachusetts Avenue, constructed ca. 1790 and razed in 1969. Evidence on city maps and atlases supports this theory, as the 1854 Walling map reveals the 2519 Mass Ave. building footprint with two ells. Consequently, the 1873 city atlas shows a solid square footprint, with two smaller buildings now fronting Tannery Street (which became Churchill in the 1930s). These two smaller buildings could be the ells (see attached maps), although only the 16 Churchill footprint has remained. Photographic evidence of the building at 2519 Massachusetts Avenue shows a 2 ½ story, clapboard, side-gable structure with a shed roof addition on the left (west) façade and gabled or hip roof addition on the right (east) façade. The roof pitch seems to be similar to 16 Churchill, as well as the off-center window alignment on the west façade (see photos).

Evidence in the City Directories strengthens the theory as well. Several relatives of Ferdinand Fischer, who worked at his tannery, are listed as residents on Tannery Street in the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Albert, John, and Lawrence. It is possible that Ferdinand wished to have separate quarters for his immediate family while they worked for his business.



Two views of 2519 Mass Ave. in 1969, with possible later additions at rear

### Significance and Recommendation

The building at 16 Churchill Avenue is significant for its historical associations with the area once known as Tannery Brook. Purchased by Ferdinand Fischer from local farmer Ammi Teel in 1864, the house was owned by the Fischer family until 1898. Ferdinand Fischer owned one of the tanneries, where he also worked as a currier, and a later family shoe business at 2521 Mass Ave. was also related to leather production in the area.

The house's construction, history, and occupants relate it to the broad architectural, cultural, economic and social history of North Cambridge. Although modest architectural details have been altered by replacement windows, asphalt

siding, and water damage, and the house is in need of extensive rehabilitation, it is the staff recommendation that the structure be found significant.

cc: Ranjit Singanayagam, ISD